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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of using heuristics, a problem-solving approach, to respond to drafts written by six university students of advanced composition in English as a second language (ESL). The students had varied language backgrounds. The teacher responded to first drafts of each of three writing assignments by writing heuristic questions in margins and at the end of the paper and providing instructions for using the questions in the revision process. The questions asked for clarification, more evidence, a more complex or coherent analysis, or more information about the writer's overall purpose. They were text-specific, open-ended, focused on content rather than form, and were limited to one to three per paragraph. Results showed that for the first two papers, the students as a group showed significant improvement. The two students rated as above average and the two rated as average writers improved at least one grade from the first to the last revision. The two rated as below-average writers did not improve as much. Results for the third, most difficult paper were not significant. Heuristics can be very effective for more advanced writers, but the focus on content alone might not be sufficient. (MSE)

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Using Heuristics to Respond to Advanced ESL Composition Students

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Heuristics have been defined as problem-solving techniques which can be used to discover, explore, and clarify a subject. Heuristic techniques commonly found in first-language composition classrooms are both structured and unstructured. Structured heuristics include Burke's pentad, Pike, Becker and Young's tagmemic analysis, and D'Angelo's classical topoi. Unstructured heuristics include Flower's clustering and Elbow's freewriting. Heuristics have also been used to encourage audience awareness and to teach critical reading. Another important function of heuristics is to repond to students' drafts to help students conceptually revise their papers. For instance, The St. Martin's Guide to Writing contains lists of questions about the content and form of a draft which help both the reader and writer of the paper explore methods of revision.

Heuristics are also a powerful tool in second-language composition. They can be used in the beginning stages of the writing process to help students generate and explore ideas. In the later stages of writing, when students have to shape their ideas to meet the needs of their readers and the rhetorical situation, heuristics can make students more aware of their audience and purpose. As Hamp-Lyons has recently noted, second-language composition must address students' need both to

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express their ideas and to conform to the conventions of academic discourse. Heuristics can be a way of meeting these two needs.

Heuristics in second-language composition can be found mostly in the beginning stages of the writing process. For instance, two popular ESL composition textbooks, Tucker and Costello's The Random House Writing Course for ESL Students (1985) and Raimes' Exploring Through Writing (1987) contain questions designed to help students explore possible subjects. However, heuristics have not been widely used in the later stages of the process, especially to help students revise their papers, despite Zamel's contention that instructors need to help students reconceptualize their ideas when they revise. One reason heuristics have been neglected in the revising process is our desire to help students correct and learn from their errors as they rewrite their papers. Although many students do need to correct errors at some point as they write, recent studies about error correction in second-language composition have been contradictory and inconclusive. For instance, a study by Lalande in 1982 found that requiring students to correct errors had a positive effect on writing development. However, a 1986 study by Robb and others found that this method of error treatment, in addition to three other methods, did not signficantly affect the quality of students' writing. The researchers in this last study concluded that

teachers can best respond to their students' writing by making comments that require students to re-think their ideas.

Using heuristics to respond to students' drafts is one way to accomplish this goal. Instructors can ask questions about the students' texts which readers would ask, questions which force students to examine their ideas from the perspective of the reader instead of the writer. These questions help extend the problem-solving, generative, and exploratory nature of revision. These questions can also address the crucial dimensions of composing: the writer's purpose, the needs of the readers, and the rhetorical setting.

Description of Study

Our study examined the effects of using heuristics to respond to drafts written by six advanced ESL composition students at the University of Arizona. The six students were enrolled in the regualar second-semester composition course for international students. The focus of the course was on writing rhetorical and critical analyses of essays, short stories, and one short novel. We chose a case study approach so that we could closely examine their reactions to the way we responded to their papers. These particular six students were selected because they represented a range of abilities and language backgrounds. Five language backgrounds were included: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and an African language.

The students wrote three major papers during the semester, each of which was revised at least once. We responded to the first version of the three papers by using heuristic questions in the margins. In the end comments, we made a brief assessment of the paper, asked more questions about aspects of the paper which needed revision, and described the process the students might use for revision. We also indicated how the students were to use these questions, e.g.,"think about how the questions in the margins might help you to further develop your topic," or "you might want to freewrite on some of the questions I've asked in the margins." Each student was also advised in an individual conference about how to respond to the questions. We corrected errors in the papers only when they severely limited the communication of ideas. When a student used a wrong word or an incorrect form of the word, we usually supplied the correct form.

The kinds of questions we asked in the margins and in the end comments can be classified into four categories: those that asked for clarification (such as, "Do you mean . . ."); those that asked for more evidence ("Why is this true?"); those that asked for a more complex or coherent analysis ("But what about the scene where . . .", "What is the connection with this idea and your previous one?"); and those that related to the writer's overall purpose ("What does this point have to do with your thesis?"). On the whole, our questions were text-specific

rather than generic, open-ended rather than directive, and focused on content rather than form. Also, we usually limited the number of questions to one to three per paragraph so that the students would not feel overwhelmed.

Results and Discussion

Appendix A shows the degree of improvement these six students made when they revised their papers. We based our analysis on the grades the students received in the course. For the first and second papers, the students as a group showed significant improvement. The two students who had been rated above average (Jina, Saleh) and the two rated as average writers (Khalid, Soon) improved at least one grade from the first to the last versions. The two students evaluated as below average writers (Jose, Maloose) did not improve their papers to the same degree. The results for the third essay, which concerned the longest and most difficult text in the course, were not significant. Two students' papers could not be evaluated; one student was caught plagiarizing and the other student never handed in her first version.

On the whole, the revisions completed by the "average" or "above average" writers were substantive and required a thorough re-thinking of the paper. Appendix B shows the first paragraph of Soon's first version of a critical analysis of Paton's short story, "The Wasteland." As you can see, marginal questions for this paragraph included, "What about 'survival fear'? Is it destructive? Useful? Does it reduce man to animal-like

behavior?" Questions in the end comments supplemented these marginal ones: "What point do you want to make about 'survival fear'? Is this fear good or bad? Why? What does it do for us or to us?" Because Soon had also discussed the setting of the story, he received these questions as well: "How does the setting contribute to the idea of survival fear? Can you put this idea in your introduction and show how it is developed by stating the specific incidents of it in your thesis?"

As you can see in Appendix C, Soon's introductory paragraph of his revised essay shows that he has started to see connections between different aspects of the story. In the process of rewriting his paper, Soon has come to a clearer sense of his message; instead of his main idea being 'survival fear,' the focus of the analysis is on how the setting develops the struggle for survival and the fear of death.

Another example of a successfully revised paper can be seen in Appendix D. This is an example of how heuristic questions helped Jina clarify and focus her analysis of heroism in Narayan's The Guide. Our questions in the margins included, "How does being a swami cause him to become a tragic hero? Is insincerity a characteristic of realistic heroes? Or of tragic heroes? Did he want to be a swami?" The revision of Jina's paper shows that she has delayed her discussion of a tragic hero in order to more fully develop her description of a realistic hero.

Naturally, it is important to examine the revisions of the two students whose papers were not, on the whole, successfully revised. In general, these two students lacked the necessary writing skills to effectively integrate new or modified ideas into their writing. Appendix E contains a paragraph from the first version of Jose's rhetorical analysis of an essay written by Malcolm X called "Freedom Through Learning to Read." Questions asked in the margins were, "What do you mean by mixed style? Different tones?", "How is the style or tone smooth? Do you mean calm? Factual?", and "How does this fact [a violent act being turned into a good thing] help Malcolm X achieve his purpose?"

Appendix F shows how Jose revised his paragraph. As you can see, Jose did try to integrate his responses to some of the questions into his analysis. For instance, he is more specific about what he means by a "mixed style," he connects the use of tone to the author's purpose, and he gives examples of the kinds of words he is referring to. However, the paragraph lacks coherence and unity; Jose is often unable to clearly connect his ideas or to express them in an understandable way. For example, at times it is hard to determine what he means by "style" or "tone." A conference with Jose revealed that his weaknesses in vocabulary and organizational strategies were due to his lack of extensive formal training in English. He understood the kind of revision expected of him, but he lacked the skills to

communicate his ideas successfully to his readers.

Jose's struggle to revise his papers raises some important issues concerning the effectiveness of using heuristics to respond to drafts of students' essays. First, some students simply might not be ready to conceptually revise their papers in the way that the heuristics encourage. For instance, Jose was able to generate new ideas for his revised essay, but he did not know how to organize these ideas coherently; the heuristics did not give him sufficient guidance to do this. Secondly, it is possible that when students who lack a sound knowledge of English structures and vocabulary are asked to explore their ideas in English, they are unable to find the right forms--or any forms--in the target language with which to express their thoughts. If, as Perl (1980) has written, the process of writing is partially a process of matching feelings and images to words--asking "are these words right for me?" (367)--then some second-language students' development of ideas will be restricted by an incomplete knowledge of the target language.

In conclusion, using heuristics to respond to ESL composition students can be an effective way of helping advanced writers to explore and clarify their ideas and to communicate these ideas successfully. However, for less advanced students, heuristics which focus mostly on the students' content and purpose for writing might not be sufficient; as Jose's revised paper shows, these students might be able to reconceptualize

their papers to a certain degree, but they will have difficulties expressing their ideas. Perhaps, as Raimes' 1985 study of unskilled ESL writers suggested, heuristics should be devised which focus not only on meaning but "on rhetorical and linguistic features after the ideas have found some form" (247). For example, we could have responded to Jose's revised paragraph by asking him why he first discusses a smooth tone, then describes an aggressive tone, and finally returns to the idea of a smooth tone. Additional research on heuristics involving more subjects at different levels of skill would give ESL composition instructors more guidance in how to respond to their students' writing.

Appendix A

First Paper	First Version	Second Version
Jose	D (3)	D-(2)
Khalid	C-(5)	B (9)
Saleh	C-(5)	B-(8)
Jina	C+(7)	B (9)
Soon	C-(5)	B+(10)
Maloose	D (3)	C-(5)

p<.016
(sig.)

Second Paper	First Version	Second Version
Jose	C-(5)	D+(4)
Khalid	C+(7)	B+(10)
Saleh	D+(4)	C-(5)
Jina	C (6)	B-(8)
Soon	C-(5)	B-(8)
Maloose	D (3)	D+(4)

p<.031
(sig.)

Third Paper	First Version	Second Version
Jose	D (3)	C-(5)
Khalid	-----	-----
Saleh	C-(5)	C-(5)
Jina	C+(7)	B-(8)
Soon	D+(4)	D+(4)
Maloose	-----	-----

p<.118
(not sig.)

Differences Between First and Second Versions

Appendix B

Introduction of Soon's first version:

The main idea of the story is about the cruel and uncivilized sides of human beings. The story reveals the similarity between animals and men in the sense that the victim has to run away from danger in order to survive. Therefore the main idea of the story is survival fear. What about survival fear? Is it destructive? Useful? Does it reduce man to animal-like behavior?

Questions at the end of the paper:

What point do you want to make about "survival fear"? Is this fear good or bad? Why? What does it do for us or <u>to</u> us? How does the setting contribute to the idea of survival fear? Can you put this idea in your introduction and show how it is developed by stating the specific incidents of it in your thesis?

Appendix C

Introduction of Soon's revised paper:

The setting is crucial to the author's idea of fear and the struggle for survival in the story, "The Wasteland". . . The waste land is so important because it provides all the obstacles that make his struggle for survival a fearful one. It is in the waste land where the man's struggle for survival is started and the fear of death is felt.

Appendix D

A portion of Jina's analysis of heroism in Narayan's The Guide

First version:

Those who are leaders can become a tragic hero, and also destroys himself for his men. Raju becomes one of these heroes when he starts to be called a Swami. However, he is insincere to him men and at the begining stage his still fits into the category of realistic heroes. He was not at all a Swami . . .

How does being a swami cause him to become a tragic hero? Is insincerity a characteristic of realistic heroes? Or of tragic heroes? Did he want to be a swami?

Revised version:

At the beginning of the stage of being called a Swami, Raju is still a realistic hero, in a sense that he was insincere to Velan and other village people. He always thought what kind of actions will seem saintly and pretended that he was concerned about the problems Velan and others had. Instead of telling them the whole truth, that he is not a Swami, he took advantage of their believing that he is . . .

Appendix E

A portion of Jose's analysis of "Learning to Read," first version:

what do you mean by mixed style? Different tones?

Malcolm X used a mixed style to introduce the reader through his main point, he started with a smooth style telling us about his experience in prison and after that his tyle change in a violent mode, with an angry tone, he usemany examples of violent acts . . .he turns this act as a good thing, he gives us a strong feeling that Turner did was correct.

to?

How is the style or tone smooth? Do you mean calm? Factual?

How does this fact help Malcolm X achieve his purpose?

Appendix F

Jose's revised paragraph on "Learning to Read"

Malcolm used a mixed styles of tone to illustrate his purposes clearly. At the beginning of the essay, he started with a smooth tone. At the story he didn't use agressive words or examples of violent acts. He started telling us about his life in prison and how he started to learn through reading. The reader has been prepared to jump into the agressive tone, which is in the middle of the essay. Malcolm with his agressive tone start telling the example of china. He started using strong words like "kill the foreign white devils". Malcolm goes to his climax of agressive tone, when he tells us about Nat Turner the killer of . . . white people. Malcolm using him as a real hero. The reader get the impression that Turner is a warrior who fights for a good cause. The reader with his lack of knowledge think that Turner is a really hero, and that all the violent acts that non-white people did were good. Finally Malcolm back to the end with a smooth tone telling us about phillosophy and if he had attended college he had gone differently. With these . . . tone Malcolm wants the reader calm down because he already got that he want. To put the courage and the anger in the reader's mind.

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